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Sir Thomas Roe: Eyewitness to a Changing World

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THE HAKLUYT SOCIETY ANNUAL LECTURE 2017

SIR THOMAS ROE: EYEWITNESS TO A CHANGING WORLD

Nandini Das

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On 10 January 1616, Sir Thomas Roe arrived in Ajmer, at the court of the Mughal emperor Jahangir, via a stop in Surat and an arduous journey across Gujarat and Rajasthan. His three-year sojourn would be filled with obstructions posed as much by East India Company factors concerned about protecting their own autonomy, as by his own dealings with Mughal court customs and officials. Yet that first major appointment would inaugurate a diplomatic career stretching across four continents and forty years, from the last fading of Elizabeth I's reign, to the thunderclouds gathering around Charles I. At the moment of his first meeting with the Emperor Jahangir, of course, Roe was unaware of both the frustrations and the rewards that lay ahead. His report of that first royal audience, written in the journal he would later submit to the Company, focuses instead on the splendour and the complex diplomatic etiquette of the Mughal court:

I went to Court at 4 in the evening to the *Durbar*, which is the Place wher the Mogull sits out daylie, to entertayne strangers, to receive petitions and presents, to give Commandes, to see, and to bee scene. To digresse a little from my reception, and declare the Customes of the Court, will enlighten the future discourse.¹

A brief account of courtly hierarchy, practices, and the emperor's daily routine follows, in which Roe dwells particularly on Jahangir's *darbar*, or practice of public audience:

Ther is noe busines done with him Concerning the state, government, disposition of warr or peace, but at one of these two last Places, wher it is publicly propounded, and resolved, and soe registred, which if it were woorth the Curiosity might bee scene for two shillings, but the Common base people knew as much as the Councell, and the Newes every day is the kings new resolutions tossed and censured by every rascall. This Course is unchangeable, except sicknes or drinck prevent yt; which must be known, for as all his Subjects are slaves, so is he in a kynd of reciprocall bondage, for he is tyed to observe these howres and Customes so precisely that if hee were unseene one day and noe sufficient reason rendred the people would mutinie; two dayes noe reason can excuse, but that he must consent to open his doores and bee scene by some to satisfye others.²

¹ Roe, *The Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe*, I, p. 106. For a portrait of Sir Thomas Roe see Plate 1 in the central plate section.

² Ibid. pp. 107–8.

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Slightly later in the account, Roe describes his first sight of the emperor:

The Place is a great Court, whither resort all sorts of people. The king sitts in a little Gallery over head; Ambassidors, the great men and strangers of qualety within the inmost rayle under him, rayseed from the ground, Covered with Canopies of velvet and silke, under foote layd with good Carpetts; the Meaner men representing gentry within the first rayle, the people without in a base Court, but soe that all may see the king. This sitting out hath soe much affinitye with a theatre — the manner of the king in his gallery; The great men lifted on a stage as actors; the vulgar below gazing on that an easy description will in forme of the place and fashion.³

The meeting went well. ‘He dismissed me with more favour and outward grace’, Roe writes with evident pride, ‘then ever was showed to any Ambassador, eyther of the Turke or Persian, or other whatsoever’.⁴

Despite that apparently successful reception, Roe had not managed to achieve much when he left India in February 1619, and the East India Company would not send another ambassador until Sir William Norris’s embassy in 1699. Roe’s account of the meeting merits our attention, however, for a number of reasons. The centrality of the account of his embassy in our collective understanding of early English encounter with India is one of those. The reputation that Roe acquired as an authority on Eastern trade was considerable, as was the wealth of detail afforded by the multiple records of the embassy, from Roe’s own journal and correspondence with almost daily entries, to his chaplain Edward Terry’s later account, the map of India produced as a direct result of the journey, and Thomas Coryat’s idiosyncratic account from the margins of the action.⁵

As a result, Roe’s Mughal embassy has emerged as a standard case study in theorisations of cross-cultural encounter, from Bernard Cohn’s assertion of the incommensurability latent in communications between the east and the west, to Sanjay Subrahmanyam’s theorisation of ‘contained conflict’ in interactions between Europe and Asia.⁶ What is most interesting in this respect is that much of this reading keeps returning to Roe’s noted intransigence at the Mughal court — his carefully cultivated resistance to assimilation, his prickliness and insistence on prerogative, his identification of the court’s theatricality, that casts now the king, then the courtiers, as ‘actors’ in a drama over which they have no control. All of this has been read often as being, at its worst, a mark of proto-colonial European superiority, and at its best, symptomatic of a fundamental problem of

³ Ibid. p. 108.

⁴ Ibid. p. 109. See Plate 2 in the central plate section for an illustration of the Court of Jahangir.

⁵ William Foster’s edition of Roe’s journal, cited above, was published in 1899 by the Hakluyt Society. Roe, *The Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe*, ed. Foster; Terry, *A Voyage to East India*; Baffin, *A Description of East India*; Coryat, *Greeting*.

⁶ Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*; Sanjay Subrahmanyam, see especially ‘Frank Submissions’ in *The Worlds of the East India Company*, and *Courtly Encounters*.

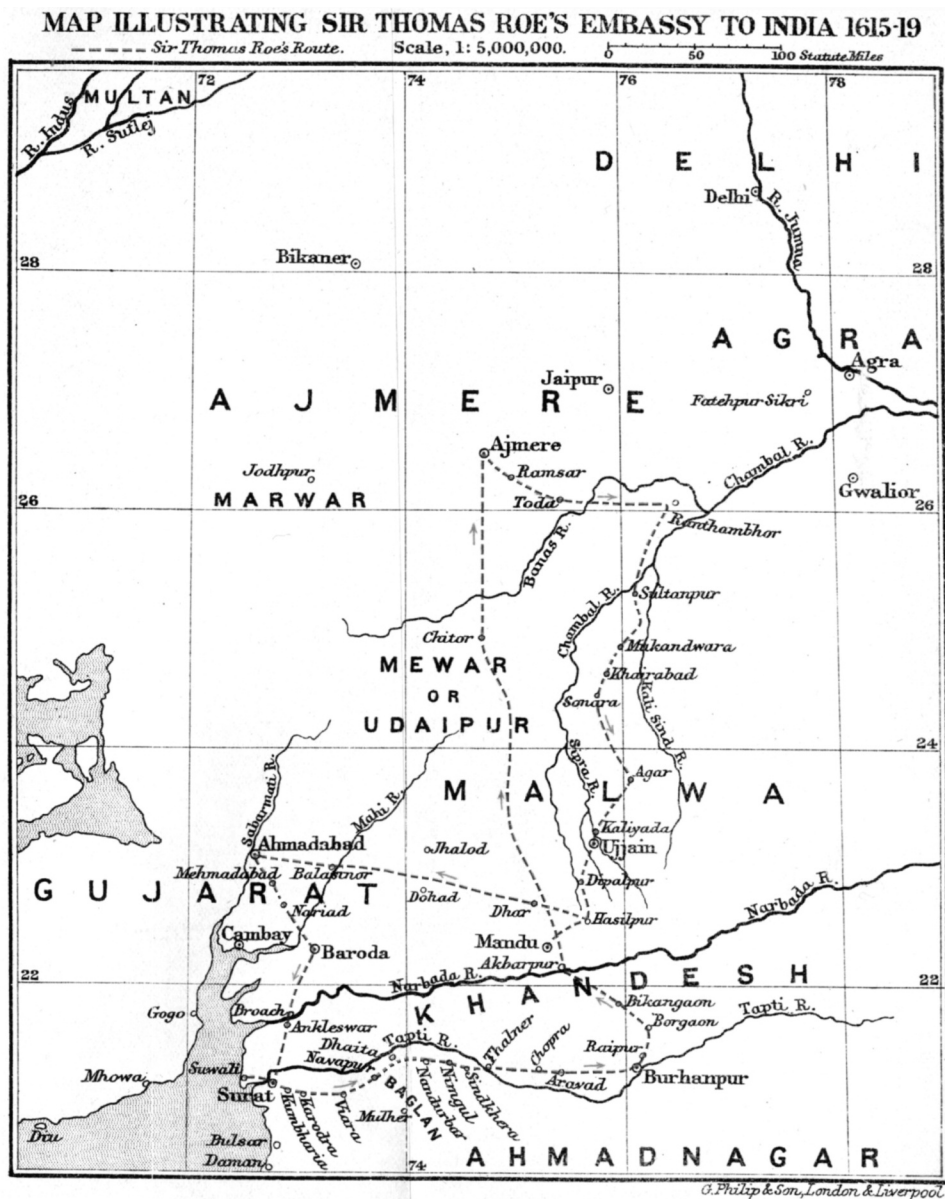


Figure 1. Map of Sir Thomas Roe's journey in India, from Roe, *The Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe*, ed. William Foster, Hakluyt Society, 1899.

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communication between the two cultures.⁷ My own interest in Roe began very much as part of that collective attempt to interrogate the moment of encounter. Yet what began as a quest to understand how and why Roe's position and negotiations during that embassy took the shape they did, kept leading me backwards and forwards into significantly less explored territories — namely the long span of his not inconsiderable diplomatic career. The question I began to ask is, what happens when we juxtapose that problematic intransigence of Roe, which has become apparently representative of English response to India, against the backdrop of Roe's long career?

In some ways that exercise could fall within the proliferation in recent years of what is being called 'global microhistory' — Natalie Zemon Davies's *Trickster Travels*, Sanjay Subrahmanyam's *Three Ways to be Alien*, Miles Ogborn's *Global Lives*, and John Paul Ghobrial's work on Elias of Babylon are all examples of that.⁸ But that exercise is not without its perils. As Ghobrial has pointed out, 'In our rush to populate global history with human faces, there is a risk of producing a set of caricatures, a chain of global lives whose individual contexts and idiosyncrasies dissolve too easily into the ether of connectedness.'⁹ Writing about his own work on Elias of Babylon, he comments that 'when it came to Elias's global life, everything about it, from his reasons for leaving Baghdad to how he represented himself while travelling, makes sense only when rooted in the study of the world he left behind. Even his own writings are the musings of a man who never stopped thinking of home'.¹⁰ Ghobrial's own illuminating approach is one 'in which the close study of a global life drags us back necessarily to a deep, local history'.¹¹ What I offer here can be seen as another option, one in which a global life is seen evolving as a function of memory, as I hope to show, where the home and the world continue to inflect each other — and the individual in question — in defiance of both geographical and temporal fault lines.

There is, however, another reason for our focus on Roe, and that too, has to do with our present attempts to understand this period. The increasing pre- or proto-colonial critical turn globally, which has driven our resurgence of interest in Roe, is also a corporate turn, interested in exploring the ways in which trade and corporations, rather than monarchies and statecraft *per se*, acted as primary drivers of transcultural contact. One could see how Roe functions as a perfect exemplar of these developments too, as an ambassador appointed by his monarch, but funded entirely by the trading company that needed a state

⁷ See, for instance, the differing views of Teltscher, *India Inscribed* and Barbour, *Before Orientalism*. For later discussions of the complexities inherent in Roe's position, see Sapra, *Limits of Orientalism*, especially chapters 2 and 3, and Mishra, 'Diplomacy at the Edge'.

⁸ Davies, *Trickster Travels*; Subrahmanyam, *Three Ways to be Alien*; Ogborn, *Global Lives*; Ghobrial, 'Secret Life'.

⁹ Ghobrial, 'Secret Life', pp. 58–9.

¹⁰ Loc. cit.

¹¹ Loc. cit.

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presence to negotiate on its behalf. However, as Henry Turner reminds us in his recent study of *The Corporate Commonwealth*, the idea of the joint-stock corporation may have left indelible marks on the world abroad, but it was shaped at home, in England, within what Turner calls the 'diversity of corporate associational life' that ranged from the medieval church and the state and the guilds, to the theatre and beyond.¹² That diversity itself has been noted before, but Turner adds to it a sustained and convincing argument about the ways in which the history of the corporations trading globally 'regularly overlap[ped] with and borrow[ed] from' corporate ontologies that animated all these other domains in early modern England.¹³ Attending to Roe's interactions with and on behalf of the East India Company while looking, quite deliberately, beyond his connection with the East India Company is therefore an experiment — an attempt to explore how attending to an individual can illuminate the fluctuating and changing relationship between the home and the world in this fluid and unstable period. It is an argument for extending the reach and range of the story that we hope to tell about both global and local encounters, and how we can do it by following in Roe's footsteps.

My purpose here is to trace three instances or points of entry into the time that preceded Roe's much-examined arrival and negotiations in India. At each of these instances Roe would witness the place of England and the English shifting noticeably and irrevocably in an ever-widening world. Each maps out points of tension. In each case, the relationship between a corporate entity and its constitutive elements was rendered problematic through issues of representation. Together, they provide a backdrop against which, I would argue, we can better understand Roe's embassy not simply as a typical or representative early English response to India, but as a series of negotiations. Shaped by a complex network of affiliations, associations, and memories, these negotiations link the home to the world, and the individual to institutions and communities beyond themselves. And in the light of that understanding, Roe's notorious intransigence emerges as a specific kind of response, and it is as much a response to the England he had left behind as it is to the India he encountered.

* * *

We will return presently to those instances, but it is worth stepping further back for a moment first. Thomas Roe, child of the comparatively underachieving fourth son of an influential London family, was born in Low Leyton in Essex in 1580/81 and educated at Oxford and the Middle Temple. He occupied a position whose implications are worth acknowledging in any attempt to understand his negotiations with the world around him. Work on Roe in the past has rarely attended to the implications of his origins, but in all our talk of Roe as the 'courtier'

¹² Turner, *The Corporate Commonwealth*, p. xv.

¹³ Ibid. p. xiv–xv.

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and a diplomat chosen by the EIC and James I to represent the company in India, it is important to acknowledge the complexity of his social connections. There were plenty of useful family connections, no doubt, but they were rooted decidedly in the City on his father's side. Roe's father, described in his will as a 'citizen and haberdasher of London' died when Roe was about six, but young Thomas could boast of two Lord Mayors of London within the preceding two generations (Roe's grandfather and uncle in 1568 and 1590), and a second uncle would take up the position in 1607.¹⁴ All of them had access to influential positions among the Merchant Tailors and the Ironmongers Companies. These were all solid civic credentials. The courtly connections came primarily from the other side, through his mother's second husband. Sir Richard Berkeley was Elizabeth I's Lieutenant of the Tower from 1595, and appointed Custodian to the Earl of Essex after his arrest. It seems from a report to Sir Robert Sidney that Berkeley may have been aiming for the position of vice chamberlain in late 1600.¹⁵ If Sidney's news is to be believed, it would certainly explain Roe's own appointment to the much-coveted position as one of the two Esquires of the Body who attended on the aging Elizabeth from around 1601 (although we only have Anthony à Wood's word for this appointment).¹⁶ That efficient doubling of civic and political connections is likely also to have facilitated his appointment in the royal children's household when James I came to England, which in turn led to a knighthood around 1603–4. But as an ambitious member of the gentry, rather than a courtier by lineage, Roe's position within the notoriously competitive Jacobean corridors of power could hardly have been secure.

It is in this context that we come to the first of our three instances, which marks yet another international diplomatic encounter, a decade before Roe would embark on his journey to India. It was the 25-year-old Roe's first diplomatic mission in April 1605, as a young and untried member of the 650-strong retinue accompanying Charles Howard, the Earl of Nottingham, sent to ratify James I's peace treaty with Spain. This would be Roe's first ringside view of a shifting political world. It is important to remind ourselves, at this point, how significant that 1605 embassy was, and how carefully its public execution needed to be planned, in order to appreciate the impact it might have had on an impressionable and ambitious young man. Given what was perceived as general public unhappiness about a peace with Spain, that care in planning began with James's very selection of his representative and ambassador – the Earl of Nottingham, who crucially, as Lord Howard of Effingham, had been the former commander-in-chief of the English fleet against the Armada in 1588 and a key presence at the peace negotiations of the Somerset House Conference in 1604.¹⁷

¹⁴ Robert Roe's will cited in Brown, *Itinerant Ambassador*, p. 5. For biographical details see Strachan, 'Sir Thomas Roe'; Brown, *Itinerant Ambassador*; Strachan, *Sir Thomas Roe*.

¹⁵ McGee, 'The Mental World', p. 86.

¹⁶ à Wood, *Athenae Oxonienses*, p. 115.

¹⁷ See Plate 3, in the central plate section, unknown artist, *The Somerset House Conference, 1604*.

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Certainly the account of the embassy written by Robert Treswell, who was part of Nottingham's retinue, underlines the carefulness with which the English and the Spanish treated each other; it also foregrounds the importance of show.¹⁸ There were careful and public displays of negotiated religious tolerance: the English were given special permission by the Governor of Galicia to celebrate the feast of St George; while the procession of the Feast of Corpus Christi in Valladolid, in which Philip III took part, was rerouted especially to ensure that the English had a good view. Royal encounters were managed with an equal eye to public perception. In August 1604, at the ratification of the peace treaty in London, King James had opened the banquet at Whitehall by inviting Juan Fernandez de Velasco, constable of Castile, to share with him a melon and half a dozen oranges – Spanish fruits transplanted and grown in the English royal gardens. He had later followed that up by presenting the constable with a diamond ring from his own hand, as a mark of the 'marriage' between the two nations, as he called the treaty. At Nottingham's reception by the Spanish king in return, Treswell recorded how Philip III descended from his chair to greet the old general, 'with most kind and affable behaviour, appointing him to sitte downe by him, and that very neere, which especiall favour was much observed, and reported as a thing never used to any ambassadour before that time'.¹⁹

Decades later, describing the Mughal emperor's habit of pairing simple clothing with extravagant jewels in his account of Roe's embassy, his chaplain Edward Terry would remember:

I was long since told by a Gentleman of honour sent as a Companion to the old *Earle of Nottingham*, when he was imployed as an extraordinary Ambassadour by King *James*, to confirm the peace made 'twixt himself and the King of *Spain*, which Ambassadour had a very great many *Gentlemen* in his train, in as Rich *cloathing* as *Velvets* and *Silks* could make, but then there did appear many a great *Don*, or *Grandee* in the *Spanish Court*, in a long black bayes Cloak and Cassack, which had one *Hatband of Diamonds*, which was of more worth by far, than all the *bravery* of the Ambassadours many *followers*.²⁰

That conversation may well have been one with Roe, whose first-hand introduction to diplomatic duty through that embassy had also inevitably been an introduction to the intricacies of representation, through which diplomacy contributed to sovereign power, and sovereign power was translated into statecraft.

While sovereignty might be taken to rest singularly in the person of the European monarch, embassies such as that undertaken by Nottingham and his retinue underlined the extent to which the performance of that sovereignty

¹⁸ Treswell, *A Relation of Such Things*. Another anonymous narrative was also published in the same year: *The royal entertainment of the Right Honourable the Earle of Nottingham*.

¹⁹ Treswell, *A Relation of Such Things*, p. 34.

²⁰ Terry, *A Voyage to East India*, p. 392.

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rested in the court, and on nominated agents of the court. On such occasions, the court or the courtly retinue acted essentially as part of a political corporate entity, one whose presence and actions at once refracted and represented – and occasionally replaced – the physical presence of the sovereign.²¹ Both early modern conceptualisations of the ambassador and the courtier, in this context, can be seen as parts of a political corporate entity headed by the sovereign. In Renaissance commentaries on diplomacy, scholars and diplomats such as Ottaviano Maggi, Alberico Gentili, Jean Hotman de Villiers and Don Juan Antonio de Vera repeatedly describe the ambassador as an authorised representation of the sovereign power of his monarch and his nation. As Hotman notes in *The Ambassador* (1603), ambassadors were endowed ‘with dignitie to represent their [sovereigns] persons and greatnesse during their Ambassage’, and that ‘an ambassage is as it were an abridgement of the principalest charges and offices that are exercised in the common-wealth.’²² Yet it was undeniable that this relationship between the monarch and the delegated representative cut both ways, framing the sender as well as the one invested with the embassy.²³

That sense of responsibility in not only representing but actually constituting the sovereignty he represented is apparent throughout Roe’s negotiations in India. It emerges in his touchy defiance of Mughal rules of precedence, in his insistence on English clothes for his retinue, in his tense and often stubborn insistence on his rights as ambassador in his negotiations with the East India Company and the Mughal court alike, in his recurrent return to the metaphor of the theatre – most famously in the instance of his much-analysed grudging participation in a *khilat* ceremony when Prince Khurram presents him with one of his own robes of gold as a gift. But the latter instance also reveals dangers inherent in that role.

By and by came out a Cloth of Gould Cloake of his owne, once or twice worne,
which hee Caused to bee putt on my back, and I made reuerence, very vnwillingly.
When his Ancester Tamerlane was represented at the Theatre the Garment would

²¹ I use the phrase ‘corporate entity’ deliberately in this instance, if only to highlight what will otherwise be implicit throughout this discussion, that when I think about Roe’s involvement with the East India Company, it is framed, inevitably and necessarily, I would suggest, by his exposure to other corporate ideas and structures. And in referring to these ‘other’ ideas and structures, like Henry Turner, I adopt David Runciman’s wider characterisation of corporation as a ‘plurality-in-unity’ that ‘identifies any enduring form of activity that is undertaken collectively and in which the whole is perceived to be distinct from and even prior to its parts, since it is always in excess of the elements that compose it’ (Turner, *The Corporate Commonwealth*, p. 26; Runciman, *Pluralism and the Personality of the State*, pp. 13–33).

²² Hotman, *The Ambassador*, sig. B8v.

²³ See Joanna Craigwood on ‘diplomatic metonymy’: Craigwood cites Pierre Bourdieu’s description of political delegation as ‘a metonymic relation’ between sender and delegate. [A]s ‘a sign which speaks’, Bourdieu adds, the delegate can also ‘say what he is, what he does, what he represents’ and so constructs the sender he apparently represents.’ [Craigwood, ‘Diplomatic Metonymy and Anthithesis’, p. 812].

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well haue become the Actor; but it is here reputed the highest of fauour to giue a garment warne by the Prince, or, beeing New, once layd on his shoulder.²⁴

Bernard Cohn's assertion that Roe responds here to a Moghul honour as if it was 'a sign of debasement' has been challenged by multiple scholars in recent years on various grounds.²⁵ However, it is still necessary to remind ourselves that the source of that response cannot be attributed simply to Roe's conscious or unconscious refusal to understand and oblige Indian customs. Theatricality in courtly practice would have been neither alien nor unfamiliar to Roe; it was of course as deeply and deliberately entrenched in the performance of English sovereignty as it was at the Mughal court. And as Richmond Barbour has pointed out, Roe, familiar with the practises of English theatre, would have known how English players themselves 'enriched their wardrobes with the genuine garments of the aristocracy'.²⁶ Accepting the prince's robe in the light of that dual knowledge reveals two things at once – that Roe's unease is directed not so much at Mughal practice, as it is at his own precarious ambassadorial identity, and that his handling of that identity in India was inflected fundamentally by European and English memories about courtly performance and diplomacy.²⁷ As a 'speaking sign', to borrow Bourdieu's image, the ambassador could be seen as being both there and not-there – a placeholder for his sovereign. If court practice was all about representation, then representation was at once the ambassador's rationale for being, as well as the primary threat to his being. Roe had learnt the need and importance of the ambassador's role in Spain; he would grapple with its implicit threat to the individual invested with the role at Jahangir's court in India.

Attending to this part of Roe's career highlights his first-hand view of the incorporated nature of the negotiations through which sovereignty exercised itself, particularly in contexts of diplomacy and the pressures this placed on individual agents. The next half decade would establish Roe's involvement with the structures of enterprise with which his name is primarily associated today – the trading companies, beginning with the Virginia Company, and England's attempts to establish its political and mercantile presence beyond the geographical limits of the nation. Roe's involvement in this particular stage with the Virginia Company has rarely drawn scholarly attention. For that very reason, if nothing else, it constitutes the second of our three stopping points.

The London Virginia Company received its first charter from James I on April 10, 1606; Richard Hakluyt was one of the founding members.²⁸ On November 20th, the first 'King's Council of Virginia' was established, consisting

²⁴ Roe, *The Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe*, ed. Foster, p. 334.

²⁵ Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*, p. 18; Subrahmanyam, 'Frank Submissions', pp. 78–9.

²⁶ Barbour, *Before Orientalism*, p. 178.

²⁷ On this and generally on Roe's response to issues of imitation, see Das, "'Apes of Imitation'".

²⁸ April 5, 1606, PRO C66/1709 in Barbour, *The Jamestown Voyages*.

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of fourteen members, most of whom had close connections at court.²⁹ On 9 March 1606/07, James issued an ordinance to expand that Council. While this was apparently in response to the Company's plea that a council of fourteen was not large enough to attend to business, it seems fairly certain that 'this was a deliberate effort to give political weight and influence to the Virginia enterprise [...at a time when relations] with Spain were deteriorating, [and] anti-Spanish merchants' complaints were intensifying'.³⁰ A new group of thirteen additional members were added to the November 1606 group, whose selection shows clear signs of the involvement of Prince Henry, the unofficial patron of the Virginia ventures.³¹ The militant Protestantism and Elizabethan nostalgia associated with Henry's court, so often in implicit defiance of James's own policy, is reflected in the inclusion of Henry's tutor and distinguished diplomat, Sir Thomas Challoner, and Sir Fulke Greville – famous for his friendship with Sir Philip Sidney, the Protestant martial hero whom Henry sought to emulate. There were courtiers like Henry Neville, Robert Mansell, and Maurice Berkeley (related to Roe's step-father's family) – all of whom had earned their knighthoods at Cadiz. Sir Richard Hawkins, who had fought the Armada, was another new member, as were Sir John Scott and Sir Edward Michelborne, who had been in the Azores voyage with Essex. Roe's name is the penultimate one in the list, and his inclusion, despite his almost complete lack of relevant experience and his youth (at twenty eight, he was the youngest in the group), is almost certainly due to his close relationship with Henry and his sister, Princess Elizabeth.

That inclusion was the first in a chain of events. The second charter of the Virginia Company was issued in 1609, drastically and significantly devolving control and re-sketching the terms of the rights and identity of the company as a corporate body separate from the crown. Roe's close association with Henry was almost certainly the reason why he became one of only seventeen from the old Royal Council who now became members of the new, augmented council. That experience, in turn, would strengthen his standing within Henry's interests in the New World and the strongly Protestant, anti-Spanish, expansionist faction at court. So in February of 1609/10, despite his almost complete lack of experience, Roe left London in command of an expedition to Guiana with the encouragement of Prince Henry, and the active investment of Walter Raleigh and the foremost member of Virginia Company's new council, Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton.

There is much that remains to be understood about this part of Roe's life. It is evident, however, that Roe's involvement with the Virginia Company did not earn him profits of any significance. And the Guiana voyage was a frustrating one, with no gold to be found, and very few advances made in annoying the

²⁹ Ibid. pp. 34–44.

³⁰ Rabb, *Jacobean Gentleman*, p. 320.

³¹ Barbour, *The Jamestown Voyages*, pp. 73–4.



Plate 1. Sir Thomas Roe by Michiel Jansz. van Miereveldt (died 1641).
© National Portrait Gallery, London.



Plate 2. Mughal miniature, As'af `Ibadallah al-Rahim, Jahangir investing a courtier with a robe of honour watched by Sir Thomas Roe, English ambassador to the court of Jahangir at Agra from 1615–18, and others, 23 Ramadan 985/4 December 1577.
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Plate 3. Unknown artist, The Somerset House Conference, 1604. © National Portrait Gallery, London.



Plate 4. Bichitr, Jahangir Preferring a Sufi Shaikh to Kings, *The St. Petersburg Album*, 1615–1618, Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.: Purchase – Charles Lang Freer Endowment, F1942.15a

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Spanish: 'a large relation of [his] poore discoveries, [...] would be as painfull to you, as they have been to me,' he wrote to Cecil from Trinidad at the end of the voyage.³² More importantly, it seems fairly reasonable to expect that Roe's experience in the councils of the Virginia Company throughout this period would have been similar to Thomas Hobbes's ringside view of 'the company's internal conflicts,' which Noel Malcolm has noted.³³ As such it would highlight for these younger agents the highly fragile and uncertain nature of the mercantile corporate body. Throughout this period the Virginia Company's public discourse emphasised the singular nature of the corporation. The Company's second charter, as Turner points out, 'expanded its political powers by naming it "one Body or Commonality perpetual ... [with] perpetual Succession and one common Seal to serve for the said Body or Commonality" and vesting it with many of the legal rights that had traditionally defined the nature of sovereignty'.³⁴ The Company's third charter of March 12, 1611 – four months before Roe returned from Guiana – made that autonomy not just commercial in nature, but actually explicitly political, describing it as 'one body politick, incorporated by the Name of the Treasurer and Company of Adventurers and Planters of the city of London for the first Colony in Virginia'.³⁵ Yet in its actual practices, Roe would have been keenly aware, the Virginia Company's structure and functioning bore silent testimony to its 'pluralistic [...] and assembled nature'.³⁶ Looking forward a decade to the 1620s, we shall see him ruthlessly exploiting the Company's characteristic factional infighting by bidding *against* the Company on the issue of monopoly on the tobacco trade.³⁷ Twenty-odd years ahead, in 1637, when he was working on his final, unsuccessful, role in proposing an English West India Company to Charles I, Roe can be found writing pessimistically to a continental correspondent about the main obstacle in any such venture: 'Not that I am not assured his Majesty's judgement and will is right, as the head, but all the members are so out of joint, and there is no trust among ourselves'.³⁸ In all these stories, as in India, I would argue, Roe's response is marked by the importance of carving out an identity that was separate in some way from the centrifugal tensions inherent within the corporation. It shapes, for instance, what Rupali Mishra has recently characterised as his 'constant anxiety about securing and demonstrating his status and authority, especially over the Company's agents' in India.³⁹ It would continue to shape his dealings

³² PRO CO 1/1 no. 25 in Strachan, *Sir Thomas Roe*, p. 32. Strachan's chapter contains the only substantial account of Roe's Guiana voyage.

³³ Malcom, 'Hobbes, Sandys, and the Virginia Company', p. 315.

³⁴ Turner, *The Corporate Commonwealth*, p. 112.

³⁵ Loc. cit.

³⁶ Ibid. p. 114.

³⁷ Strachan, *Sir Thomas Roe 1581–1644*, pp. 122–3.

³⁸ *Calendar of State Papers*, vol. CCCLXXII, p. 554.

³⁹ Mishra, 'Diplomacy at the Edge,' p. 9.

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with all the trading companies over the subsequent decades – the EIC, the Levant, the Virginia Company.

It is amidst this gathering anxiety about the incorporated nature of both sovereign power and mercantile enterprise that an image of the individual agent begins to emerge, one that brings us finally to our third instance, and back, indeed, to London. Sometime in the first half of the year 1611, Ben Jonson's play, *Catiline his Conspiracy*, was performed by the King's Men, either at the Globe or at the indoor theatre of Blackfriars. Even discounting Jonson's characteristic complaints about lack of popular appreciation, it is safe to say that it was not a resounding success, with members of the audience walking out in the middle of the action. It seemed that in James I's conspiracy-filled London – still redolent of the faint, paranoid whiff of the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 and the breakdown of the Great Contract between the king and the Commons that Cecil had tried to introduce in 1610 – audiences were perfectly willing to go to a play about Catiline's conspiracy to overthrow the Roman Republic and murder its Senate in 63 BCE, but they were not so amenable to sitting through Jonson's painstaking reconstructions of Cicero's speeches denouncing Catiline. There does not seem to be much in common between Roe's mercantile involvements in this period and the world of Roman politics that *Catiline* depicts, yet a literary resonance draws them together.

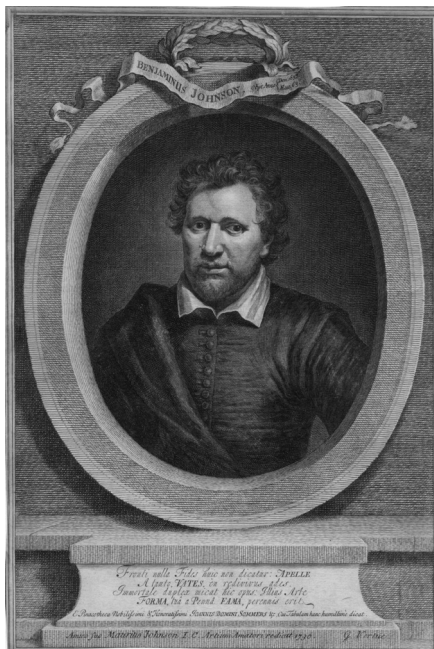


Figure 2. Benjamin Jonson, after Abraham van Blyenberch, based on a work of circa 1617.
© National Portrait Gallery, London.

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Within the play, against a backdrop of widespread corruption and wealth pouring into Rome from across the globe, Jonson's Chorus pray to the gods before the crucial election of Consul. Catiline, the blue-blooded aristocrat and ruthless exploiter of plebeian frustrations is to go head-to-head with Cicero, the 'new man'. The Chorus hopes that the 'publique voice' will make a 'worthy choice'. 'Let whom we name', they say, 'Have wisdom, fore-sight, fortitude,/Be more with faith, then face endu'd/ And studie conscience, above fame'.⁴⁰ In the final lines of the play, it is clear that Cicero — self-righteous and tedious as he may be — is that man, echoing that choral precept of conscience above fame after quelling Catiline's plot:

the memory
Of this glad day, if I may know it live
Within your thoughts, shall much affect my conscience,
Which I must alwaies study before fame.
Though both be good, the latter yet is worst,
And ever is ill got, without the first.⁴¹

I should emphasise here that I am not suggesting a direct and deliberate parallel between Roe and Cicero, whose depiction has been linked by some Jonson scholars to Robert Cecil. But for Roe, as he stood on the threshold of the next stage of his career after his return from Guiana, a certain resemblance would be evoked no doubt through Jonson's own deliberate echo, which surfaces in one of the two epigrams he addressed to Thomas:

Thou hast begun well, Roe, which stand well too,
And I know nothing more thou hast to do.
He that is round within himself, and streight,
Need seek no other strength, no other height;
Fortune upon him breaks her self, if ill,
And what would hurt his Virtue, makes it still.
That thou at once, then nobly mayst defend
With thine own course the judgment of thy Friend,
Be always to thy gather'd self the same:
And study Conscience, more than thou would'st Fame.
Though both be good, the latter yet is worst,
And ever is ill got without the first.⁴²

Jonson's epigrams are notoriously difficult to date, but the evocation of the beginning of a new stage ('Thou hast begun well, Roe, which stand well too'), as well as the implicit parallel to Cicero, the victorious 'homo novus' Consul, I would suggest, indicates the step that Roe was poised to take, when he participated in

⁴⁰ Ben Jonson, *Catiline his conspiracy*, London, 1611, sig. E2r.

⁴¹ Jonson, *Catiline*, sig. O3v.

⁴² Jonson, *The Workes*, p. 798. Jonson knew the Roe family well, and wrote poems to a number of members of the family.

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the Parliament of 1614. At any rate Jonson's image of representative statecraft on the verge of breakdown in *Catiline* would prove to be strangely prescient of what, with historical hindsight, later would be labelled as the 'Addled Parliament'.⁴³ And the ideal of Horatian *libertas* that Jonson evokes time and again in his writing – the concept of the truly 'free' man whose 'gather'd self' rises like a lighthouse against the tempests of fortune, who studies conscience rather than fame – helps to unpack the formulation of the self and its relationship with the institutions around it, which Roe would take with him to India.

The Parliament in question was called, with little warning, on 5 April 1614. There was anxiety about it from the very beginning, since relationship between the King and the lower house was already strained to breaking point on the subject of imposition of new taxes. On 19 February, "from the Court at Newmarket," Sir Thomas Lake, the Royal Secretary, wrote by the King's command, to some Nobleman unknown 'that the King 'recommendeth to your Lordship's special care [...] that the House be furnished on men of good disposition, and apt to have due consideration of him and his estate, or else his Majesty shall have little comfort in the Assembly'.⁴⁴ Roe had spent a large part of 1613 caught up in the wedding of Princess Elizabeth to the elector Palatine, and had been in the wedding party that accompanied the princess to Europe. On 17 March 1614, he wrote to William Trumbull that 'yet it is thought by the wisest and honestest sort that the king and his subjects will be heartily reconciled and that as he will, like a gracious prince, hearken unto them, so they will show themselves loving subjects'.⁴⁵ By 8 April he was an active member in the Commons, one of two representatives from Tamworth.

It is important to remember that the tension as proceedings began in May was not simply between the Parliament and the king, but also, and from the very beginning, between the Lords and the Commons. As Theodore Rabb has pointed out, 'the central issue, when the Lords met as a Committee of the Whole on May 21, was not whether they were for or against impositions, but whether they should confer with the Commons'.⁴⁶ When Richard Neile, bishop of Lincoln, essentially charged the Commons with 'mutiny and sedition' by saying that any debate on impositions by anyone who had taken the Oath of Supremacy would 'strike at the root of the imperial Crown,' Roe was one of those members of the Commons who attempted to calm the resulting sense of predictable outrage.⁴⁷ While the details of the protracted negotiations between the two Houses is not essential here, it is useful to note

⁴³ For more on the Addled Parliament, see Moir, *The Addled Parliament*; Clucas and Davies, *The Addled Parliament*.

⁴⁴ Lansdowne MSS 487, quoted in Nichols, *Progresses*, II, p. 755.

⁴⁵ Hinds, ed., *Manuscripts of the Marquess of Downshire*, p. 340.

⁴⁶ Rabb, *Jacobean Gentleman*, p. 190.

⁴⁷ Jansson, *Proceedings in Parliament, 161*, p. 348. Note: Subsequent references are given in parenthesis in the text.

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Roe's role as an active and instinctive mediator throughout, and fascinating to track the changes in his standpoint as the impasse dragged on. On 25 May he argued for prior consultation with the Lords, that 'then may we have better ground to complain to the king' (p. 351), and when the Upper House declined a conference, he was among those who maintained that the Commons ought not to go to the king regardless, since to do so would 'draw the Lords to be our enemies' (p. 359). But as time passed, having finally run out of patience with the Lords he argued that the Commons should 'disable [Richard Neile] either to be about the king or to be a bishop or to be among reasonable men'. Instead he should be left 'to run away and bewail his estate in the woods among wild beasts' (p. 411). On 6 June he indicated that his privileged access to ambassadors' dispatches revealed the joy of other nations at 'the fraction between the king and his people' (p. 427). He proposed an immediate address promising supply 'if he [James I] will right us; and upon that condition he would give, and not otherwise' (p. 427). Throughout this tumultuous period, Roe's negotiations reflect in a microcosm the forces that were splitting apart both the Parliament and the very concept of the commonwealth. The crisis that he noted, when he warned that the dissolution of this parliament might mean 'the ending not only of this but of all Parliaments', is the tragic impending collapse of the corporate form of the civic 'commonwealth' which is also implicit in the play with which he shared his Jonsonian epigram (p. 420).

That day of unavoidable collision between commonwealth and the monarch, however, was still to come. As far as we are concerned, by long digression we have come back to the point where Thomas Roe is ready to embark that ship to India. In December 1614, Antonio Foscarini, Venetian Ambassador in England, wrote to the Doge and Senate.

The merchants are preparing four ships to send to the country of the Mogul, the smallest of 1,000 and the largest of 1,100 tons. With these they beseech His Majesty to send as ambassador Sir [Thomas] Roe (*Ro*), who will be paid by them. The king has consented, but not to the person, because he comported himself in an unseemly manner in the last parliament.⁴⁸

We know that James ultimately gave his support, and Roe would spend the next three years struggling under the dual pressures of the Company and the Crown. But placed against the backdrop that we have just described, it is difficult not to see how this pre-history of tension marks the deep suspicion of monarchic power that manifests itself in Roe's response to the Mughal court, his resistance to the theatrical, seductive, all-encompassing nature of sovereign performance and its 'reciprocall bondage', his touchy insistence on the fragile coherence of his role

⁴⁸ *Calendar of State Papers (Venice)*, vol. 13, p. 268.

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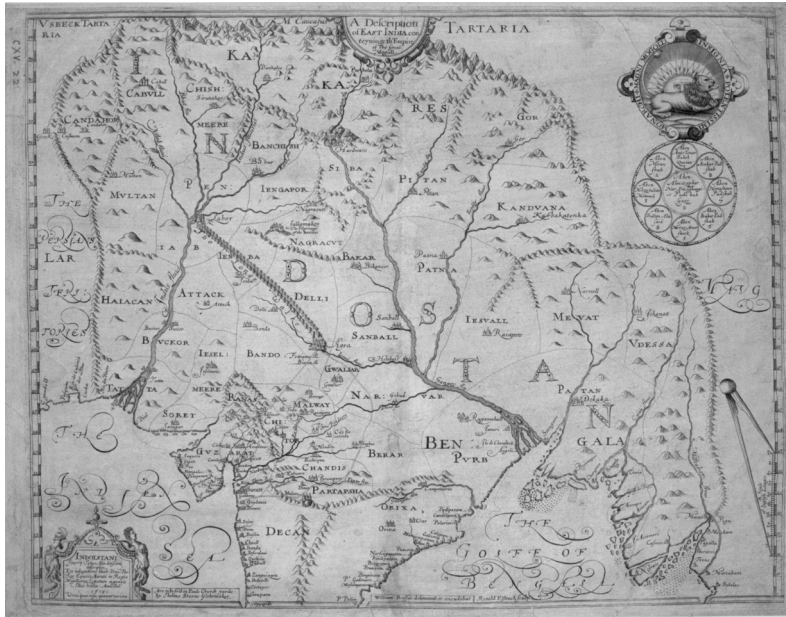


Figure 3. William Baffin's map of the Mughal Empire, London, Thomas Sterne, 1619.
© The British Library Board. Maps K.Top.115.22.

as ambassador, his resistance to assimilation into either company business or Indian practice.

* * *

Each of the instances examined here – the embassy to Spain in 1605, the involvement with the Virginia Company and the Guiana voyage in 1607–11, and the Addled Parliament in 1614 – played a significant role in shaping the place of England and the English, both internally and globally. Negotiations between a corporate entity and its individual agents or constituents emerges as a crucial factor in all of them. In each case a corporation enters into a refractive and reflective relationship with the individuals whom it is meant to subsume and represent; in each case this raises anxieties that fundamentally threaten the corporation as well as individual agents like Roe. We tend to think of Roe's embassy only in terms of what it tells us about English experience in and response to India. And yet, the picture, as the trail we have followed here illuminates, is far more complex. It reveals experience at home shaping experience abroad, and every experience abroad cumulatively shaping others that come after it. Can we really separate the home and the world in this light? Or does it mean that even in his deliberate resistance to change and adaptation, Roe proves himself to be

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an eyewitness to a changing world, revealing inevitable traces of transculturality, of the transference of memory and identity?

I would like to end with a final story – or rather, a pair of stories that link two places, and two times. One of those is that same January of 1616 where we began, with Roe at the Mughal court. But the Mughal court is in a strange city. Ajmer is strategically important, no doubt; halfway into Rajasthan, at the midpoint of the Aravalli mountain range, it was a place from which the Mughals could ensure their dominance over the troublesome Rajput princes. But it was also a place of pilgrimage, famous for the dargah or tomb of the Sufi saint, Khwaja Muinuddin Chishti. It was a city where Hindus and Muslims had come together since the twelfth century, where the motto of Sufi mysticism, *sulh-i-kul* (peace with all) carried more weight than the religious ideologies of either community. It was also the city where the Mughal emperor Akbar had prayed for a son at the dargah. The son born to the Muslim Akbar and his Hindu Rajasthani wife, apparently as an answer to that prayer, was the prince Roe had travelled so far to meet – Salim, otherwise known as Emperor Jahangir, the ‘World-seizer’. Was Roe even aware of that complex intermingling of subcontinental religiosities that Ajmer symbolised in sixteenth and seventeenth century Indian history, or of the religious pluralism that was actively fostered both by Akbar and Jahangir? His journals of the embassy, so trenchant in their insistence on difference, so deliberate in distancing Roe from the intricacies of Indian court life within which he found himself, on which so much scholarly attention has focussed in recent years, would suggest otherwise. Certainly, his journal entries and correspondence during the Mughal embassy show little overt acknowledgement of Mughal political and ideological strategy.

A somewhat different picture emerges, however, if we undertake a last headlong rush through time, and look forward about a quarter of a century. Four years before his death, at the very last English Parliament that he would attend, even as the country moved inexorably towards Civil War, Roe would deliver a speech. Characteristically for Roe, it is a speech that connects England’s decline in trade and resulting financial crisis with the lack of trust between the sovereign and the people.⁴⁹ Equally characteristic is the bluntly pragmatic point he makes about possible reforms ‘to settle and assure the Ground of Trade upon Staple commodities’ – mainly wool. English woollen cloth is ‘heavy and hot Wearing, and serves but one cold Corner of the World,’ he argues:

But if we embrace the new Draperies, and encourage the Walloons, and others, by Privileges, and Naturalisations, we shall employ all the Wool we have, set more People to Work, than by Cloth [...] and this we may supply France, Italy, Spain,

⁴⁹ The ‘breach’ of ‘the privileges of merchants at home’ by the king, he notes at one point, ‘hath been a great discouragement unto them; and, without which duly observed, they cannot regulate their trade.’ Roe, *Sir Thomas Roe his speech in Parliament*, p. 8.

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Barbary, and some Parts of Asia, by such light and fine Stuffs, as will fit those warmer Regions.[...] ⁵⁰

Repeatedly the solutions Roe proposes circle back to a substantial economic case for English social and sectarian pluralism. Some of the crisis has ‘sprung from Pressures upon tender Consciences,’ he notes, ‘in that many of our Clothiers, and others, have forsaken the Kingdom, and carried their Arts with them, to the unexpressible Detriment of the Commonwealth.’ ⁵¹ The solution to England’s financial insecurities lie in being able to retain those native merchants and craftsmen, and welcome the expertise of ‘strangers’:

But in this Course, I must observe, that these strangers, so fit to be nourished, and being Protestants, may have privileges to use their own rights in religion, so as they be not scandalous, as the Dutch and French had granted to them by Queen Elizabeth; and certainly, the settling of religion secure in England, the fear whereof made many weak Minds to waver, and abandon this Country, is, and will be a great Means to resettle both the great and lesser Manufactures of Woollen Commodities. ⁵²

Behind a very English struggle to rework individual agency into the formative principle of the corporate structures of both state and society here, as Rajiv Kinra has noted, the shadow of Sufi Ajmer and the Mughals looms silently and incongruously. ⁵³ The grounds for Roe’s argument in the speech had been prepared somewhat earlier by one, deliberately solitary example of success. ‘That if the severall sorts of Callicoes made of Cotton woolls in the Moguls and Dans Dominions, doth clothe from head to foot all Asia, a part of Europe, Aegypt, much of Africa, and the Easterne Islands as farre as Sumatra, which makes that Prince without Mines the richest Prince in the world,’ he had claimed, ‘by his Majesties Grace and Priviledges granted to the Dutch, I am confident wee may make and undersell in all Linen cloth in all the Nations in Europe.’ ⁵⁴ At the end of a long career that pretty much spanned the known world, the association that Roe makes here between Mughal economic success and its pragmatic tolerance of diversity within its incorporated body is implicit, but telling. It is also an invitation to re-evaluate our understanding of the traffic – both material and memorial – that shaped contact between the home and the world in early modern England.

⁵⁰ Loc. cit.

⁵¹ Ibid. p. 7.

⁵² Ibid. p. 8.

⁵³ Kinra, ‘Absolute Civility’, pp. 257–8.

⁵⁴ Roe, *Sir Thomas Roe his speech in Parliament*, p. 6.

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